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Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African-American Students

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III

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The racial achievement gap is as old as slavery. In the 18th and 19th centuries European and American intellectuals relied on craniometry to explain and defend racial hierarchy. They measured our heads and compared them to those of gorillas, chimpanzees, and orangutans. In the 20th century intelligence testing replaced measuring skulls as the “science” which proved that Blacks belonged at the bottom of the social, political, and economic ladder.

Once again social scientists are focused on the racial gap in academic achievement. They tell us that African-American, Latino, and Native-American students are performing significantly less well on standardized tests than their white and Asian peers. When Black and Latino children finish fourth grade they are two years behind their white and Asian classmates according to nationally normed tests. By the time they hit grade eight they are three years behind, and as they reach grade 12 they are performing at the same level as white and Asian eighth-graders. The statistics on grades, graduation, and dropout rates show the same disparities. Although much of the gap can be attributed to poor schools and income inequality, the educational advantages usually associated with middle-class status have not closed the gap between middle-class Blacks and their white peers.

Unlike the avowed racists of the past, today’s scientists examine the racial achievement gap to understand its causes and to devise gap-closing solutions, and educators and parents have followed their lead. Poor Black and Latino parents have supported high-stakes testing because they know that the schools are not teaching their children basic reading and math skills and they want to hold those schools accountable. The Minority Student Achievement Network, a national consortium of 15 racially integrated, affluent school districts, has collaborated with researchers from the College Board to study the disparity in achievement. African-American parents have participated in programs designed to improve their own children’s academic performance. But despite the good intentions and importance of such efforts, I experience a strange mixture of anxiety, anger, and self-doubt when I listen to the

public conversation about the achievement gap. With each new study, opinion piece, and news article, my head is being measured again.

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III, coauthors of *Young, Gifted, and Black*, know the source of my complex and conflicting emotions. They understand that the public conversation about the achievement gap takes place before a backdrop of slavery, Jim Crow, minstrel shows, and a host of historical and contemporary practices and cultural icons that give the conversation meaning, a meaning that almost always reinforces our nation's ideology about Black intellectual inferiority. As Dr. Perry says in the opening chapter, "Although this conversation does not explicitly assert that Black students can't achieve, it is about their underachievement. . . ."

In 1954 the Supreme Court declared that segregated schools were inherently unequal. The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* relied on the Court's finding that the segregation of black pupils "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community." The injury of segregation is found in its social meaning, in its designation of a superior and an inferior caste. Segregated schools were symbols of America's beliefs about race. As Justice Harlan had observed almost 60 years earlier in his dissent from the "separate but equal" doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, "segregation proceeds on the ground that colored citizens . . . are inferior and degraded."

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and our schools are still segregated. In the nation's capital, where I served on the school board and my children attend school, the schools are more segregated than they were 40 years ago. White parents flee to the suburbs and to private schools. Black professionals follow them when they are able. The Washington, D.C. public school system is 95 percent non-white and 70 percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The race and class segregation within the District is even more extreme. East of the Anacostia River, in Wards Seven and Eight, over 99 percent of students are Black. Over 90 percent of the white students in the district go to a small number of schools in the white neighborhoods of Ward Three.

But no one in this town talks about segregation. No one talks about racism, stigma, white flight, or about what whites are running from and what they are taking with them. There is much talk about the disastrous state of our public schools—in think tanks, on editorial pages, and at dinner parties where the invited guests all send their children to private schools. The *Washington Post* sees a bloated bureaucracy: a corrupt teachers' union, incompetent school administrators, and ineffective school board members. President Bush's "No Child

Left Behind” Act requires “standards” and “assessment” to be sure that “under-performing” schools are held “accountable.” But no one talks about who has left whom behind. No one measures the enormous divestment in social and political capital that has accompanied white flight. No one holds accountable the parents who have fled to the manicured lawns of private schools. No one mentions that the best measure of the achievement gap is the distance between Ward Eight and Ward Three.

When I teach my students about unconscious racism, I ask them to think about words such as *standards*, *assessment*, *accountability*, and *achievement gap* and picture the people who are being talked about. Who is not up to the standard? Who needs to be tested? Who are the students and teachers at failing schools? Who needs to be held accountable? Who sits at the bottom of the achievement gap?

Few of us will speak openly of our doubts about the intellectual capacities of Black children and teachers, but the discourse among educators and education policymakers evidences the continued vitality of such beliefs. Asa Hilliard points to a professional literature “filled with student, family, and cultural deficit theories, proposed minimum competency remedies, reflecting a terrible pessimism about the power of (Black) teachers, schools, and children.” More importantly, these views shape our educational practices—the way Black children are spoken to, disciplined, and taught. When children are told to “shut up and sit down,” when the toilets in the bathroom are broken and the classroom ceiling leaks, when there are no gifted or Advanced Placement classes (or when Black students are discouraged from taking them), these practices and conditions, like segregation, are symbols of racist ideology. They “generate feelings of inferiority.”

The three African-American scholars of *Young, Gifted, and Black* have each contributed an essay that is distinct in discipline, perspective, and voice. However, the essays share common insights: African-American students must achieve in the face of racism. Our society and our schools devalue them by virtue of their social identity as African-Americans. It is no wonder that so few of them perform to their full potential. These simple truths are seldom spoken in the national conversation on race and academic achievement. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard offer little in this book that directly addresses the deep structural inequalities that are the chief causes of the achievement gap: a society still profoundly segregated by race, wealth, and social capital. Instead, they challenge the terms of the current conversation that denies Black students’ gifts and they offer models for achieving excellence despite the burdens of racist stigma and stereotype.

What must African-American students bring to the task of academic achievement? What commitment must they have, what social, emotional and physical resources, what support from others, are required when African-American intellectual inferiority is so taken for granted that even well-intentioned individuals routinely register doubts about Black intellectual competence? Perry answers that ideology must be countered with opposing ideology. There must be an alternative narrative of intellectual gifts, of resistance and achievement, that challenges racist ideology. Perry argues that African Americans have such a narrative, a tradition of storytelling that contains a philosophy of education: “Freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership.”

Perry offers the narratives themselves as evidence of this tradition: the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and the contemporary narratives of Malcolm X, Jocelyn Elders, Gwendolyn Parker, Don L. Lee, Ben Carson, Septima Clark, and Maya Angelou. Perry might have made her point with fewer examples, but these stories speak eloquently in support of her thesis—especially Douglass’s account of his master’s discovery that his wife had been teaching Douglass to read. Douglass was most struck not by the vehemence with which his master forbade his wife to teach him but by the reasons given. Education would “spoil a nigger,” make him unfit to be a slave, discontent, unhappy, and unmanageable. The power of this narrative is not just in the content of the lesson—education as liberation—but also in the act of Douglass’s telling his own story, the former slave now supremely articulate, subverting the ideology that claimed slaves were incapable of consciousness.

From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . The decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. . . . What he most feared, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought, and the argument which he so warmly waged, against my learning to read, only seemed to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn.

Perry argues that schools must encourage in African-American students “identities of achievement” and “intentionally socialize” students to the behaviors that are necessary for them to be achievers. Of course, the lesson of achievement as a form of resistance to racism is more complicated today than it was in Douglass’s time or even 50 years ago. When there were “white” and “colored” signs on bathrooms and drinking fountains, the message they conveyed was clear and the responsibility to disprove it was the whole community’s

imperative. The segregated Mississippi schools my parents attended were intentionally organized in opposition to the ideology of Black intellectual inferiority. Well-spoken, well-mannered, well-dressed teachers saw their vocation as racial uplift. “He always expected us to perform at the highest level,” says my mother of Mr. Bowman, her principal and math teacher at Magnolia High in Vicksburg. In the 1950s my sisters and I attended predominantly white schools in suburban New York. We were told we must excel because we represented not just ourselves and our family, but the race. The narrative of achievement as ideological battle made sense because the ideological battle lines were clear.

Today African-American students live in a more confusing world. They experience the slights, stereotypes, and exclusions of racism but civil rights laws have made racial discrimination illegal, and most white Americans embrace the ideal of racial equality. Yet false claims of color blindness mask persistent racist attitudes. Surveys show that many Americans believe that Blacks are more prone to violence, less ambitious, not as hard-working, and less intelligent than other groups. Many of my own law students—bright, high-achieving African-American young people—worry that affirmative action may stigmatize them. When they do not know the full extent of racism’s history and enduring effects, when racist ideology is coded or unconscious, they may blame their Black classmates or even themselves for reinforcing the stereotypes that discount their talents. Some suffer from anxiety at the threat of being pre-judged because they are Black.

Students like mine are the subjects of Claude Steele’s research. Steele, the holder of an endowed chair in social science at Stanford University, is the brother of Shelby Steele, a less academically accomplished but more famous author. Shelby Steele is an outspoken opponent of affirmative action. His best-selling book *The Content of Our Character* argues that affirmative action has contributed to Black students’ underperformance by encouraging them to think of themselves as victims who are not responsible for their own success or failure. Claude Steele supports affirmative action, but he shares his brother’s concern about the persistent underperformance of African-American college students from the middle class. The gaps between these students and their white classmates in standardized test scores, college grades, and graduation rates could not be explained by social and economic deprivation, and Steele was skeptical of theories that pointed to the students themselves, such as poor self-image, a distracting peer culture, lack of motivation, or Herrnstein and Murray’s ignominious suggestion in *The Bell Curve*—genes. I suspect that none of these rang true for Steele because he had taught too many brilliant, highly motivated Black students at Stanford whose performance could not be explained by these theories.

Steele was convinced, however, that something racial must be depressing the performance of these students. He and his colleagues began not by asking how the intelligence, motivation, or peer culture of the Black students themselves might explain their troubles; rather, they examined aspects of the world the students encountered at school. Steele introduces his thesis with a story from Stanford.

[A friend was worried about] a normally energetic Black student who had broken up with his longtime girlfriend and had since learned that she, a Hispanic, was now dating a white student. This hit him hard. Not long after hearing about his girlfriend, he sat through an hour's discussion of *The Bell Curve* in his psychology class, during which the possible genetic inferiority of his race was openly considered. Then he overheard students at lunch arguing that affirmative action allowed in too many underqualified Blacks.

By this young man's own account he had experienced very little of what he thought of as racial discrimination, but Steele wondered if the features of his world contained in this story might have a bearing on his academic life. Steele's essay summarizes several years of carefully controlled research through which he and his colleagues identified a phenomenon they call "stereotype threat": the threat of being viewed through the lens of negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype.

Steele gave an extremely difficult Graduate Record Exam in English literature to Black and white Stanford students who were statistically matched in ability. The students were told that this was a test of "verbal ability." Steele's hypothesis was that this would trigger the Black students' fear that their performance on the test might confirm the stereotype about the intellectual ability of African-Americans and this anxiety would in turn depress their performance. Indeed, this is precisely what happened, with Blacks performing a full standard deviation below whites. The same test was administered to another matched group of Black and white students. This time Steele told the students that the test was part of a laboratory experiment to study how certain problems are solved. Steele stressed that the task did not measure a person's level of intellectual ability. This simple instruction profoundly changed the meaning of the test. The "spotlight anxiety" was removed and the Black students' performance rose to match that of equally qualified whites.

In a series of experiments that further refined the test of his hypothesis, Steele found that the most achievement-oriented, skilled, motivated, and confident students were the most impaired by stereotype threat. What made Black students more susceptible to the anxiety of stereotype threat was not weaker academic identity and skills, but *stronger* academic

identity and skills. Black students' performance often is impaired because they are trying too hard to disprove or distance themselves from the stereotype rather than not trying hard enough. Steele also reports finding elevated blood pressure among Black students performing under stereotype threat that significantly exceeded that among white students or Black students not under stereotype threat.

Steele's prescription for overcoming stereotype threat and its detrimental effects is to, as far as possible, remove the threat. The first step is to acknowledge the existence of societal racial stereotypes and recognize the many cues from teachers, students, and institutional practices and policies that can evoke a sense of threat. Schools and universities must then adopt policies and implement programs that refute that threat or its relevance to the target. Steele argues that "the success of Black students may depend less on expectations and motivation—things that are thought to drive academic performance—than on trust that stereotypes about their group will not have a limiting effect on their school world."

This would seem a very different solution than that proposed by Steele's coauthors, both of whom see teachers and schools with high expectations for Black children as critical to engendering high academic achievement. But trust is the flip side of expectations. Black children will trust their teachers to treat them without reference to societal stereotypes only when those teachers expect much of their intellectual gifts. Steele's own research confirms this. In a study of how teachers could overcome stereotype threat when giving feedback on written work across a racial divide, Steele found that Black students trusted and could accept criticism from professors who explicitly conveyed that they were using high standards and that they believed the students could meet those standards.

In the book's final section, Asa Hilliard III echoes the themes of Perry's opening essay. The achievement-gap debate is less about a search for ways to improve the educational opportunities of poor Black children than it is about the reinforcement of beliefs about Black intelligence. This belief system, rooted in slavery, colonization, and the ideology of white supremacy, has led academics and professional educators to begin with a search for Black students' deficiencies as the explanation for their academic failure or success. Hilliard acknowledges that language and cultural diversity, poverty, crime and drug-ridden neighborhoods, and single-parent, mostly female-headed households may determine opportunity to learn. They do not, however, determine capacity to learn. The search for student deficiencies diverts attention from both the gap in opportunity, created by income

inequality and inadequacy of resources for schools, and the gap between African-American students' performance and their potential to achieve.

Hilliard contrasts the prevailing research that focuses on Black children's deficiencies with the work of exemplary teachers and schools who have created cultures of excellence and produced high achievement in typically low-performing schools. He tells us of schools where calculus is taught to fifth-graders, of a teacher who uses Socratic method to guide a regular sixth-grade class, in a poor, African-American neighborhood school, through a lesson on logarithms and exponentiation. Hilliard describes educators who respect prior knowledge and engage in critical analysis, who treat their children as scholars.

The point of these narratives is not just to prove the existence of excellent educators but to challenge the common assumptions that shape prevailing approaches to research and public-school reform policy—assumptions about methodology, student mental capacity, and student mental health and behavioral characteristics that provide the rationale for what Hilliard calls the “brutal pessimism” about African-American students' potential.

If I have one misgiving about this otherwise important and powerful book it is that its authors have not directly addressed the African-American community's participation in the modern-day stigmatization and miseducation of our children. In a conversation in which victim-blaming is a recurrent theme, I understand the authors' reluctance to reinforce a message that distracts us from the central task of naming racism and the savage inequalities of opportunity as the primary causes of the achievement gap. However, African-Americans are not immune to the disease of racism. I have heard Black teachers call their students “stupid” and “ignorant,” or say, “What do you expect from kids like this?” I've heard Black parents chastise their children with the same demeaning words and heard the words repeated as children taunt each other on the playground. I want to make clear that the abusive adults in our community are a minority. I have heard the same abuse issue from the mouths of white parents in upscale suburban malls. I also know that when Black adults speak this way to children they are parroting their own teachers and parents, reenacting the destruction of their own psyches, the stunting of their own gifts. This is how racism is internalized and reproduced.

Young, Gifted, and Black offers a forceful antidote to the victim-blaming that pervades most policy discussion on Black achievement. The book offers few broad programmatic prescriptions, but several follow logically from the book's evidence. Create cultures of excellence and high expectations in schools for Black students—cultures that define success

by superior achievement rather than marginal improvement. Recruit and nurture school leaders and teachers who are committed to the project of excellence, scholars who believe Black students are partners in the scholarly endeavor. Educate and organize Black communities to insist on excellence in their schools, to demand the resources necessary to that task, to reject the fraudulent reforms of watered-down standards, high-stakes testing, commercial rote-learning programs, and phony “school choice.” We know what excellent schools look like. We know how to reproduce them. The challenge is political. Can we create the political will to change when the achievement gap is a condition of the oppressors’ privilege?

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions to integrate our children into the logic of the current oppressive system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes what the revolutionary Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called the “practice of freedom,” the means by which the oppressed become critical thinkers and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. For Freire, education, liberation, and humanization are inseparable. The teacher must trust in the students’ ability to do this work. These two lessons are essential to promote high achievement among African-American students. Students must understand the relationship between their education and the struggle for liberation, and teachers must believe in their students’ capacity for becoming full participants in their own liberation and humanization.

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